



Lewis & Clark
**Public
Health**

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Cool Weather Signals Start of Air-Quality Monitoring Season

Lewis and Clark Public Health began issuing daily air-quality updates this week, as it enforces local regulations aimed at reducing air pollution during the fall and winter seasons.

“This is the time of year that can bring weather extremes--wild wind storms or calm, windless days,” said Jay Plant, environmental health specialist with the health department. “Those calmer days and nights are often accompanied by temperature inversions that trap fine particle pollution emitted from our chimneys, cars, trucks, and other activities. Air quality can deteriorate quickly when the weather doesn’t give us the breeze we need to clean away our daily air pollution.”

When this happens, the health department may declare a “poor” air quality stage and issue temporary restrictions on indoor and outdoor burning throughout a designated Air Quality Protection District that includes Helena, East Helena, and the Helena Valley. A map of the district and other air quality information is available at www.HelenaAir.org.

“During a poor episode, residents should rely on other cleaner sources of heating their homes for a few days until air quality improves, the public health risk diminishes, and any burning restrictions are lifted,” Plant said.

Three stages are used to designate air-quality status during the monitoring season:

- **Good:** Particulate levels are low and there are no restrictions on the proper use of solid-fuel burning devices.
- **Watch:** Air quality is moderate and particulate levels are not expected to improve. Residents are asked to voluntarily avoid or reduce the use of solid-fuel burning devices, especially those with fireplaces and other devices not certified by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).
- **Poor:** Particulate levels are high and the National Weather Service predicts poor dispersion conditions. Indoors, only pellet stoves and EPA-certified burning devices are allowed. Smoke emitted from these devices cannot exceed 20 percent opacity, a measure that indicates how cleanly the device is being burned.

Our mission is to improve and protect the health of all Lewis and Clark County residents.

Updates on air-quality status will be provided daily through local media, online at www.HelenaAir.org, and by phone at 406-447-1644.

Residents may apply for an exemption to burn an older wood-burning device during a “poor” stage if they meet certain income guidelines or if they have a heating system that is temporarily not working. To qualify for the latter exemption, the person must show proof from a licensed heating specialist that their heating system isn’t working and how long it’s expected to be inoperable.

Anyone unable to meet the exemption requirements may apply for a variance to the regulations. Forms for both the variance and exemption are available by calling 406-447-8351.

Burning cleanly and efficiently can significantly reduce the pollution produced by solid-fuel burning devices, Plant said.

“Smoke from woodstoves is the primary source of winter particulate air pollution throughout Western Montana and Lewis and Clark County,” he noted. “Exposure to wood smoke can cause breathing problems, headaches, and chronic bronchitis, and it can aggravate existing lung disease. Burning a clean, hot fire will reduce these negative health effects.”

Burning cleanly also results in less creosote buildup in the chimney, which reduces the risk of a chimney fire. It also reduces the amount of wood that’s burned, saving time and money. Tips for how to burn cleanly are available at www.HelenaAir.org

It’s illegal in Montana to burn prohibited materials such as garbage, building materials, plastics and hazardous wastes, Plant said.

For more information, contact the Environmental Services Division of the health department at 406-447-8351.